



A Conversation with Ronald Gruner, author of

COVID WARS

America's Struggle Over Public Health
and Personal Freedom

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Q: What inspired you to write *COVID WARS*, and how did you approach documenting such a recent and polarizing event?

A: After living through the COVID pandemic, I had no interest in spending several years writing about the pandemic. But friends encouraged me to do so. Their encouragement inspired me to read Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* documenting the London Plague of 1665 and Alfred Crosby's *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. After realizing that both books were written more than fifty years after the pandemics, I decided then to write a contemporary account of what we Americans experienced during the COVID pandemic.

Q: *COVID WARS* delves into historical pandemics like the 1918 Spanish Flu. What lessons from those past crises do you think were most applicable to COVID-19, and how were they ignored?

A: There were more similarities than differences between the three pandemics. During both the London Plague and Spanish Flu, people naturally resisted home quarantines and community lockdowns; these are huge burdens on people. During the Spanish Flu, for example, Philadelphia chose to remain open while St. Louis remained largely closed. Philadelphia's death rate was more than four times that of St. Louis. That lesson seems to have been forgotten when COVID struck. Vermont, for example, closed its borders during the pandemic. It's COVID death rate was the lowest in the nation, 1,200 COVID deaths per million. On the other end of the scale, Mississippi remained open and suffered 4,500 COVID deaths per million. There were other contributory factors, but how states, counties, even cities responded to COVID had a major impact on death rates, employment, and societal disruption.

Q: You explore how political divides shaped the pandemic response in the U.S. What surprised you most about the impact of partisanship on public health measures?

A: Politicians who represented regions with poor healthcare systems, relatively unhealthy constituents with high obesity rates and lower than average life spans tended to resist public health measures including social distancing, face masks, and vaccination. As a result, their constituents often suffered COVID death rates significantly higher than the national average.

Q: One of the key themes in the book is misinformation. In your research, what were the most damaging conspiracy theories, and how do you think they gained such traction?

A: The conspiracy theories regarding COVID vaccines were the most damaging. Nearly from the beginning of the pandemic, absurd theories that the vaccines had been developed by an evil global cabal to control the world's population, contained microchips that communicated with 5G cellular towers, and were more

dangerous than COVID itself discouraged millions of Americans from taking the vaccine. Hundreds of thousands of Americans died needlessly as a result.

Q: Your analysis highlights economic disparities during the pandemic. What data or trends stood out to you as most telling about how the crisis affected different social classes?

A: The economic disparities during the pandemic were one of the strongest trends my analysis revealed. From 2019 to 2021, nearly all Americans, on average, saw their inflation-adjusted income decline by several percentage points. The exception was the truly wealthy earning \$2 million or more annually. Their after-tax income, adjusted for inflation, increased over 16 percent from 2019 through 2021.

Q: You use over eighty charts and visualizations in the book. How did you select the data to include, and what role do you think these visuals play in understanding the pandemic?

A: I used a combination of charts, tables, and maps based on what I was trying to communicate. For example, many factors contributed to the varied COVID death rates across the states from obesity levels to political orientation. So, a table which depicts how the multiple factors correlate with death rates is an effective, if somewhat complex, means for conveying these relationships. On the other hand, I used national maps to show the effect of specific events such as the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally which very likely ballooned COVID deaths rates in North and South Dakota during 2020.

Q: The title emphasizes a struggle between public health and personal freedom. Do you think the U.S. found the right balance, and what lessons should future policymakers take from this period?

A: Unfortunately, the United States did not come close to finding the right balance. Of the twenty largest developed nations, the United States had both the highest COVID death rates and the largest loss of employment during the pandemic. It will take time for future historians to fully understand why the United States failed so badly during the COVID pandemic. But certainly, a major factor was the confusion and distrust sown by our national leadership, from Presidents Trump and Biden, from our public health officials, from our opinion leaders in cable and social media, and from the scores of crackpots spreading conspiracy theories.

Q: How do you hope *COVID WARS* will contribute to public discourse and policymaking in the years to come?

A: Yes, of course, but surely not in my lifetime. Emotions are still running too high to have an objective discussion on the COVID pandemic. But over the decades the emotions will be washed away leaving, hopefully, objective facts from which future generations may draw to learn from our mistakes.

Q: What challenges did you face in researching and writing about such a polarizing topic, and how did you ensure objectivity in your narrative?

A: COVID is a complex subject and, unfortunately, polarizing even over simple issues, for example, whether to wear a face mask in a crowd. As an author who spent his career first as a working engineer followed by success as a technology entrepreneur, I tried to follow the engineering mantra, “data drives out speculation.” There’s a lot of data in *COVID WARS*, certainly too much for some people. But that data is taken from reliable sources, I believe, and verifiable.

Q: For readers who might be hesitant to revisit such a painful period in history, what do you hope they will gain from reading *COVID WARS*?

A: In writing *COVID WARS*, I attempted to make the book more than a dry history of the COVID pandemic. Among the many anecdotes, the book discusses how Londoners in 1665 reacted to a scourge over which they had little control; how America likely would have lost its War for Independence had George Washington not inoculated his troops against smallpox; how the virus was discovered and why viruses can be so lethal; how “Alternative Facts” have become the foundations of alternative realities millions now choose to embrace; and much more...